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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Radio Service
OFFICE OF INFORMATION

"Housekeepers' Chat"

Thursday, Jan. 11, 1934

FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY

Subject: "What the Food Label Does Not Tell." Information from Food and Drug Administration, U. S. D. A.

--ooOoo--

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

I don't mean to liken myself to royalty, for about all we have in common is that uneasy feeling. In my case, it comes from the fact that every once in a while, in my attempts to give helpful information, I am misunderstood. Simply misunderstood. (No doubt that's what a queen thinks when somebody cries: "Off with her head!")

Here's a letter that will explain what I mean. It's from a listener who has just become interested in the Pure Food law, particularly in ints provisions for labeling food products.

"I'm going to read labels from now on," she writes, "whenever I buy food in packages, bottles, or cans. I didn't know until yesterday, when a member of our Club gave a talk on food labels, that they contained so much information. I was glad to learn that under the Pure Food law it is illegal to sell adulterated foods, and that the labels give the exact amount of what is in a package or bottle Such information will be a good help to me, for I am going to begin buying the family groceries in a short while."

A very young housekeeper, no doubt. Now here's the rest of the letter -- this is the part that made me feel uneasy:

"I am especially interested in labels," she continues, "because my husband is sensitive to wheat flour. Anything made with wheat flour -- cake, cookies bread, soup, and so forth -- upsets him seriously. I myself am sensitive to strawberries, which is something of a tragedy, but at least it is easier to avoid eating strawberries than wheat flour. Will you please send me more information on reading labels? I heard a radio talk given some time ago on the subject, but I don't remember just what was said."

You can imagine how troubled I felt when I received that letter. Somebody - and it might have been I -- has given the impression that the present Pure Food law requires that ingredients of food products be listed on the label. Such is not the case. The Pure Food law has done a great deal for us, and I don't like to concentrate on its weak points. However, the truth is that those of us who are sensitive to certain common foods, wheat flour for example, cannot expect much help from the Pure Food law.

It may surprise you to learn how many people are sensitive to certain common foods. Almost one-third of the population, according to medical authorities. I have a friend who can't eat white of egg without developing a rash. I know of others who can't eat tomatoes, eggs, fish, strawberries, or anything that contains cottonseed oil.

Such a reaction is known as food allergy. Of course if you're allergic to strawberries or fish, you can avoid them. But if you happen to be allergic to something like wheat flour or white of egg, you're simply out of luck, if you're buying cake or salad dressing. The label does not warn you that the cake contains wheat flour, or the salad dressing white of egg.

Under the present Food and Drugs act, better known as the Pure Food law, there is no requirement that labels declare ingredients that might cause allergic reactions. However, food labels do carry very important information, and it pays us to read them carefully. Labels, in order to be considered truthful under the law, not only must refrain from telling an out-and-out lie, but also must not convey an erroneous impression. For instance, it is unlawful to sell a salad oil, like cottonseed, corn or peanut oil, under a label adorned with a picture of olive trees.

The Pure Food law makes it illegal to manufacture or sell adulterated or misbranded food, and it also requires a statement of the quantity of contents on all packages of foodstuffs except very small ones. As I suggested the other day, by reading the label you can save yourself the embarrassment of buying a great big bottle of vanilla extract, with sunken panels, when a much smaller bottle, honestly made, holds a greater quantity of extract.

The letter I've just read you might be filed with another that I received shortly after Christmas. It was from a mother whose young son had been given a box of candy, each piece of which contained a metal toy. The child had broken a tooth on a toy airplane.

"I suppose," wrote his mother, "that I should be thankful the boy did not swallow the trinket, or strangle himself. I am -- but I was considerably annoyed to find such dangerous candy is being sold in this enlightened age. Doesn't the Food and Drugs act protect children from such things?"

The answer to that question is No. Somehow it seems rather inconsistent that an airplane, product of such a modern day, should be imbedded in a piece of candy. We can fly all over the world in airplanes, but we can't protect our children from such dangerous products as candies filled with bits of metal.

There's another danger in these prize candies. Some of the prizes are made of lead, and some of the lead may be absorbed into the candy itself. Lead poisoning may result if the candy is eaten very often. Of course, if children had their way, such candies would be eaten quite regularly, for what child doesn't love a surprise?

"Jonathan Jo had a mouth like an O,
And a wheelbarrow full of surprises."

I hope that Jonathan Jo's surprises were something safer than candies filled with matal toys.

The Food and Drug Administration has a big collection of the prizes taken from such candy -- toy pails, animals, whistles, crickets, rings, buckles, and jackstones. (What a lot of damage the jackstones could do, to a sound set of teeth!

Under the present Food and Drug law nothing can be done about these candies because the trinkets are not part of the candy -- they're merely covered with it.

Perhaps you have heard of the child who was taken to a hospital in Tacoma, Washington, last summer, to have one of these toys extracted from his throat. It was a toy rooster, from a penny candy. However, the candy proved to be an expensive item, by the time the bills were paid for hospital expenses, X-ray, anesthetic, and

and so forth. Three similar cases were reported recently, from Massachusetts.

The Food and Drug Administration was convinced that it did have authority, under the present law to seize these dangerous candies and remove them from the market, but when the government officials tried to take action against such a lot of candy, a Federal judge ruled that it was not in violation of the Food and Drug law.

So that's that. The Food and Drug Administration can only warn parents not to let their children buy "Prize" confections with their pennies. Fortunately, there aren't so many of these candies on the market not as formerly, but they are still to be found.

Tomorrow: "Platter Meals."